

# Column: Give young people a testimony instead of an order

By **Jená Bellezza**  
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**H**ave you noticed the drive today for youth engagement? From "How do we get youth involved?" to "How do we get the youth to embrace our message?"

The norm has always been to tell them what *not* to do. My problem with this method has always been we've often then not followed this through with alternative behaviors amongst which they can choose to replace the behaviors they are being told to abandon; or better, even encourage them to come up with their own alternative behaviors. It's just: Don't do ... and have fun with that.

I think part of the problem here is our belief that all youth need to be parented, that is, told what to do. We as a culture even view learning as telling kids what they need to know and do.

May I suggest a paradigm shift here? Sure, children need to be filled with information. They come here empty vessels just waiting to be filled with pertinent data so they may fulfill their reasons for being, if you will. But what I've learned is that the older a child gets, telling does not motivate as well as experiencing.

What do I mean by that? Have you ever watched a tween or teen's reaction to a testimonial? Someone sharing their life experiences around a behavior or topic? It moves youth to process the behavior rather than just follow a directive. They pick up something relevant to them, and due to that relevancy, what they learn then triggers the buy-in required to forgo their current behavior for an alternative. Directives, on the other hand, eventually get tested, meaning kids often end up trying out the behavior they've been directed not to do, just to see if it's really as bad as the adult says.

Why am I sharing all this with you? Well, there are a lot of issues in our culture today of great concern to parents, administrators, even legislators. And there they go, distributing directives like "don't" and "stop."

But recently, I had the pleasure of viewing some of Lake County's own youth filming a public service announcement on prescription drugs. Instead of a somber, directive tone and message, the youth presented uplifting insight into a day in the life of teens today, specifically what happened when they stumbled upon one of the many challenges life throws at us throughout our time here on this earth, their experience with it, the choices they made to get through it, and how they overcame it.

The impact it left on me, who, I must confess, am a kid at heart, was that what seems OK, even natural, in life may have dire consequences. And, rather than run from those consequences, do something constructive about

them, including letting others know about them. Like, "Dude! I tried this, and trust me, you don't want to do this! It like downright sucks!"

In the end, our actions are all a choice. But what I learned from this PSA is that if you want to get a serious message to today's youth, testimonials given in the context of just living life have such a greater impact on our actions than directives. And you don't need to be all defeatist in behavior or tone, just real. Then, let them decide.

That part is always the hardest, but in all honesty, it produces some amazing results. Yes, adults, what I'm charging you with here, in order to get youth engagement and buy-in, is to give them your testimony, and not directions.

The PSA discussed in this op-ed stars local students and will be running in the AMC Theaters in Merrillville from Sept. 22 through October 17.

*Jená Bellezza serves as the Prevention Chair on the Lake County Substance Abuse Council Board, and is also Vice President of Strategic Partnerships & Branding for Indiana Parenting Institute.*

[community@indianaparentinginstitute.org](mailto:community@indianaparentinginstitute.org)

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